

October 5, Ordinary 27C (Luke 17:5-10)

The spirit is willing, but the inner horticulturist is weak.

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

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A while back we had some landscaping done around our home in an effort to move to native and low-maintenance plants. This work included relocating a couple bushes to more favorable locations in our yard, something we were told would benefit the bushes themselves, the new plants coming in, and the overall aesthetic.

We loved the look of the final result, and it's much easier to take care of. But before long, it became clear the bushes weren't moved properly, because they began to die. As seasons passed and native perennials bloomed in their turn, the bushes lost their leaves and grew dry and brittle, finally turning into bare, buff-colored starbursts of pure kindling.

Having read up on the process of relocating bushes, I know that it is indeed a tricky prospect. There are better and worse seasons for this work. The roots require pruning and should not dry out under any circumstances. Who knows exactly what our team did wrong, but until we finally got the bushes removed, there they stood, a visual reminder of the ways our lives are dotted with good intentions and confident overpromises, ignorant errors and egregious mistakes.

Jesus says that with only the tiniest granule of faith, we can pull off the impossible, including uprooting a bush and transplanting it—not just into waiting soil but into the sea itself, a feat of spiritual hydroponics. Alas, the spirit is willing, but the inner horticulturist is weak.

Increase our faith! the disciples plead. In Matthew's rendition of the mustard seed parable, the disciples don't make this request; instead they simply ask why Jesus is able to rebuke a demon that they cannot. Here in Luke, the circumstances are different. Jesus has just finished telling his followers about the dire consequences for causing someone else to sin, as well as about the necessity of forgiving those who seek it: seven times a day if necessary. If we're up on our biblical numerology, we'll recognize seven as a number of completion and perfection—we're called not to forgive grudgingly, but completely and wholeheartedly. Eternally.

I give the disciples some credit for admitting they don't have what it takes and asking Jesus for an infusion of faith. Jesus responds with some shocking news: the disciples, who've left everything to follow him, who genuinely seem to want to get it right, who have stuck with him longer than I probably would have, and who will be sent to the four corners of the earth to spread his message, have even less faith than one of the tiniest things a naked eye can see. A mustard seed is smaller than a freckle, smaller certainly than a drop of sweat or blood.

Given the gulf between the faith this work requires and the faith we actually have, it's no wonder that Jesus elaborates on his point by invoking slaves and masters. The language rings harsh in our ears: the slave does what is asked and shouldn't expect plaudits, or even daily bread, before the work is done. Commentators have worked like exegetical Zambonis to smooth this over, arguing that Jesus is simply using the familiar norms of the time to exhort his listeners to obey God. Modern translations also do their best to help us get the point more directly. The First Nations Version reframes the master/slave dynamic as a tribal elder with a young hunter, and Eugene Peterson summarizes the point thusly in *The Message*: "When you've done everything expected of you, be

matter-of-fact and say, ‘The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.’” Still, it’s tough going.

As I look around at a world that feels increasingly unspooled—some days, the news literally takes my breath away—I understand the disciples’ desire to have enough faith to meet the moment. But if I’m honest, what I’m really wanting is for all of this not to hurt quite so much. Maybe if I have enough faith, it won’t devastate me to see immigrants arrested while at the doctor or to watch us walk away from our climate commitments. Maybe with enough faith it will all be less gutting.

But I’m reminded of an elite runner and coach I follow on social media. He’s sometimes asked by brand-new runners when it will feel easier. Or they want to know what it’s like to run so seemingly effortlessly. He tells them, “It doesn’t get easier, you just get stronger.” This guy literally runs more than twice as fast as I do, but when he’s giving it his all and I’m giving it my all, the effort is similar. And when someone is starting out in the sport, the reward for being able to run a 5K without stopping is the chance to run a 10K, if one chooses.

With an increase in faith comes an escalation in the work we’re called to undertake. Perhaps that’s what Jesus is up to here. We can’t be blamed for wanting it to be easier. But the reward for growing in our faith is the opportunity to join God’s work more fully and more deeply.